

# HOW TO WRITE BUSINESS LETTERS



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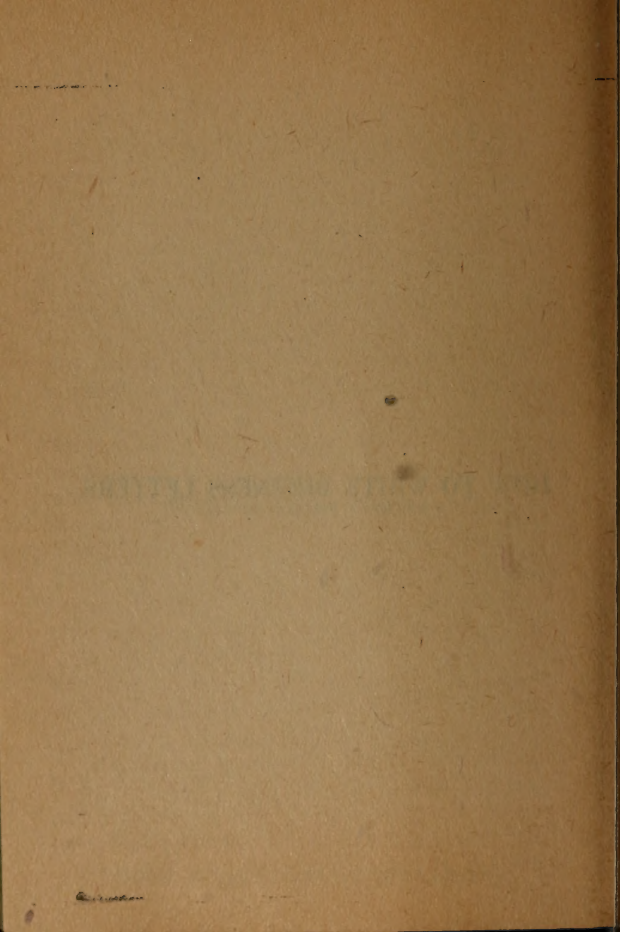
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## HOW TO WRITE BUSINESS LETTERS

The first thing to remember in writing business letters is what they are. A business letter is nothing at all but a letter about business matters. It is not a strange and fearful genus of its own, but is simply—in spite of horrible examples to the contrary—a written communication from one human being to another, concerning itself with the commercial interests of writer and recipient.

The principal thing to aim at in the business letter is absolute clarity; the next most important is brevity. Add to these two positive rules one negative one: avoid all stock phrases and words; and your business letter is already outlined.

Such terms as “favor” for “letter”; “yours of the —th inst. (or ult.) received, and in reply would say”; “anticipating the favor of a reply”; “thanking you in advance”; “your order received and same will have our attention”; “enclosed herewith”; “under separate cover,” etc., should be wiped out of business letters forever, though perhaps all of us have been guilty of one or more of these. To the perspicacious, they simply mark the writer of unoriginal mind and lack of initiative.



On the other hand, the grotesqueries which some "modern" business men commit in their letters are equally to be shunned. To illustrate, these, let me quote a letter which I have actually had sent me:

Hello, Miss deFord:

Now, listen. I have a proposition here that will really interest you. When you get what I have in mind you will turn three handsprings, if your arteries aren't too stiff, and go mark this date on your calendar with a red pencil.

Here's the big idea"—

and so forth for two single-spaced pages, to the final: "Here's hoping you'll be good to yourself and get in on the ground floor NOW."

I leave it to the reader whether he thinks many people respond to this form of business letter, and what kind of people they would be.

Before a single word is written of a business letter, it has already made its appeal or sounded its warning by its physical appearance. If you have ever had any correspondence with the largest corporations, the national organizations which do millions of dollars' worth of business every year and pay big salaries to their office managers, you will remember that their letters were almost invariably on heavy white bond paper, with the letter-head (usually engraved) in black, and typed with a black ribbon. Some



latitude is allowable, of course, and there is no objection to gray or tan paper, or blue printing and typing.

But I recall one firm which uses bright yellow paper, with a sickly chocolate brown letter-head and ribbon, and another which employs respectively pink and bright red. Such weird combinations certainly attract attention, but unless you are aiming at a clientele with low taste and mentality, they will prejudice the recipient before he even begins to read the letter. The same thing is true of oddly-shaped and sized envelopes and paper; of stationery the greater part of which is taken up by advertisements of the writer's business; of letters written in queer forms, such as the following:

Dear Madam:

This is written in response to your inquiry concerning HARDWOODE furniture. I am pleased to be able to tell you that HARDWOODE furniture may now be purchased in your town. Your local dealer is J. H. Smith & Sons. This store carries a complete line of HARDWOODE tables and other kitchen equipment, and is ready to serve you no matter—

at which point, having reached the end of his triangle, the writer was obliged to start another page!

I have before me as I write another horrible example. It comes from a plant nursery in the middle west. At the top of the page is a picture in colors of the strawberry beds of this concern, with their name in yellow and black above it. The whole upper left-hand corner is taken up by an enormous bunch of very red strawberries. Then follows, all down the left side, a series of portraits—the president, the vice-president, the secretary, and the treasurer. At the bottom of the page is a two-line motto in large type. The result is that when the bewildered reader has torn his eyes from the picture gallery, he finds the letter proper crowded into about half the usual space, and looking it.

It goes without saying that all business letters must be typewritten. In the few cases in which, by force of circumstances, a handwritten note is allowable—in applications for positions, payments of personal bills, etc.—be exceedingly careful to make your writing more than usually legible, and to write as briefly as possible. In a case I know of a man joined a society and sent in his dues. His writing was so dif-

ficult to read, however, that the secretary could not puzzle out his name. If his address had not been printed on the stationery it would have been impossible to answer him at all; as it was, it was necessary to write to the address, ask the unknown kindly to print his name, and wait for the reply, from a city 1,500 miles distant, before the membership could be issued.

In another case a woman sent in dues without even giving her address; the only way in which she could be reached was by addressing her in care of the bank on which her check was drawn. Still a third person, a man again, sent a post office money order from a large city; a letter addressed simply to the city was returned for further directions; and presumably some day he will write in great indignation to know why his communication was never given a reply.

Much information of use to every writer of business letters will be found in *Typewriting Self Taught* (Little Blue Book No. 1009), by the writer of this little volume; and also in the following Little Blue Books by Lloyd E. Smith: *How to Write Letters* (855), *Common Faults in Writing English* (82), *Spelling Self Taught* (681), *Grammar Self Taught* (682), and *Punctuation Self Taught* (683). In *Typewriting*

*Self Taught*, especially, you will find technical advice as to the spacing, addressing, dating, etc., of business letters. It is preferable that such minor details be uniform as all business houses keep a file of their correspondence, and it is much easier to find a letter in a hurry if the date-line (say) is always at the top right-hand corner. Idiosyncracies as to such matters should be reserved for your letters to your personal friends, who cannot help themselves, and will probably burn your correspondence after reading it, anyway!

Some time ago, E. Haldeman-Julius published in the *Haldeman-Julius Weekly* a classic example of a bad business letter, with his witty reply to it. The chief fault of this bad letter, though it had many, was an excess cargo of "blah." The writer, of course, had committed the very usual fault of failing to differentiate among his correspondents, and of forgetting that the average business man will swallow without complaint a lot of stuff that the recipient who is himself a journalist and author will only be annoyed by. But do not think, because Mr. Babbitt never makes sarcastic references to the kind of letters you write him, and perhaps sends in his orders as usual, that you are making a hit with him by fulsome flattery and pages of extraneous matter. Some

day a company in the same line of business will write him a letter that will attract him by its directness and brevity, and, other things being equal, you will be left to wonder why Babbitt & Co. have gone over to that crook So-and-so.

For example, here is a letter asking for patronage, as actually written, followed by the same letter as it should have been written:

It is unnecessary to tell anyone of your well-known standing the importance of using the very best office equipment. You would not have arrived at your present heights had you not always demanded the latest and most efficient aids to business.

This being so, you will be grateful for the information that XYZ carbon paper is *different*. Not only does it cost half the money you are paying now, no matter what brand you are using, but it will last twice as long. It is made by a new process, and will positively not rub off. Tell your stenographer her pretty white fingers will no longer need the aid of pumice stone after she has handled carbon copies, and watch her beg you to send in an order for good old XYZ at once.

On this beautiful spring morning you are beginning to think of the relaxation and pleasure of summer. Be sure that when you go on your vacation *this* time you will leave no office worries behind you to greet you on your return. When the big vacation is over, and you are in harness once more, you want to be able to say, 'Miss Jones, let

me see the copies of all the correspondence while I was gone.'

And, oh boy! when she brings them to you, and they are all clean, sharp, easily readable XYZ carbon copies, tell me right here, Mister, won't that be a grand and glorious feeling?

Obey that impulse *now*. Sit right down at your mahogany desk and make us out a check for..... for a dozen boxes of XYZ carbon paper. It will be the biggest piece of business you will do today.

How many orders will that bring back, compared with such a letter as this?—

Knowing that you must be interested in hearing of a new carbon paper that costs half the price of any now on the market, and is guaranteed to last twice as long, I am sending you in this letter a sample of XYZ carbon.

This carbon paper is produced by a new, patented process, and will positively not rub on the paper or fingers. Erasures may be made without the usual ugly smuts on the copy. The copy is permanent, and cannot fade.

Please try this sample of XYZ carbon paper until it is worn out. If you are pleased with what it does, we shall be glad to have your order for a dozen boxes at the special introductory price of ....., or you will find XYZ carbon at all the better stationery stores.

Frequently a single error in grammar or spelling will prejudice a reader against the subject matter of your letter. But how much more fatal is a failure in courtesy! An organi-



zation with which I am acquainted sent out this form letter:

Your annual dues expired the first of this month, and we hope you will wish to renew at once. Please let us have your check for.....at your earliest convenience. If you cannot renew now, please let us know when you expect to do so.

The returns were exactly two percent. The letter was then changed as follows:

Your annual dues expired the first of this month, and we trust you will wish to renew them and thus manifest your continued interest in our work. We shall be glad to have your check for.....at your convenience. Permit us to take this opportunity to thank you for your helpfulness and generosity in the past.

The immediate returns this time were forty-eight percent.

Probably no class of business letter writers commits more sins in this respect than collection agencies. There is something about collecting a bad bill that seems to make people remarkably offensive in their mode of attack. I have known several cases where people who were temporarily embarrassed but had every intention of paying a bill as soon as possible allowed it to go to court and preferred to fight it out there rather than give anything to an agency whose letters were, or appeared to be,

studied insults. Granting that a certain proportion of the persons addressed by such an agency is made up of "dead beats" who never mean to pay anything, a certain other proportion will pay when able; and in any case, which of these notes do you imagine will get better results?

Your monthly payment of \$25 on this bill is now overdue. Let us have your check by return mail, or costs will be added at once. If you don't want us to cause you plenty of trouble, let us hear from you immediately. You are doubtless aware of how unpleasant we can make it for you, so if you wish to avoid this, don't delay.

(This letter sounds incredible, especially in view of the fact that nearly all of this bill had already been paid; but it is a genuine one.)

We have not yet received your monthly payment of \$25 on this bill, and are reminding you that it is overdue, as we know you wish to keep up these payments regularly. We want to avoid burdening you with costs or annoying you by bringing this matter to suit, and we are sure you will co-operate with us by letting us hear from you at an early date.

The first example can only make the recipient swear, the second *may*, at least, make him reach for his check-book.

I do not know why it is, but business houses which send form letters to ~~women~~ frequently

make it extremely obvious that they consider they are writing to idiots." Perhaps they are, sometimes; but no idiot likes to have the accusation rubbed in. Here is a letter, for instance, which I have just received; doubtless it is going to thousands of women without a thought in their pretty heads, but it is also going to thousands of intelligent women, women themselves trained in business, yet who would be appreciative customers of the wares advertised if they were not offended by the very terms of the offer:

Special and Confidential.

Ma Chere Amie:

. . . How can I describe this miraculous treatment? How can I make you believe that you can actually have a lovely new complexion in fifteen minutes? [You can't!] Ah, my dear friend, you must see for yourself. You must TRY the.....

Let me send you a large package of this exquisite, creamy compound. Yes, a full \$5.00 package, practically FREE. I only ask that you pay the very small sum of \$1.95. [!]

Not even a single penny in advance need you send. Just mail the enclosed card. And oh! what a pleasant surprise, what happiness will be yours when you see your enchanting new loveliness. You will tell your friends, and thus you will help me introduce my great discovery to others.

Please mail the card right now—this minute.

Don't wait a single day. You surely will mail the card TODAY, won't you?

Thank you so much.

Your sincere friend.

My own belief is that about the only orders "my sincere friend" will get will be from women who will find they haven't got the \$1.95 when the postman arrives. The treatment mentioned sounds interesting; almost every woman would like a clear skin, and if it had been described in less picturesque terms and the letter had been less rhapsodic I might have "bitten." As it is, having copied the dithyrambs, I consign them to the waste-basket. And I don't think I am unique among "ma chère amie's" longed-for customers.

A man of wealth and known probity once showed me a letter he had received. He is a very busy man, and a trifle eccentric. He had made a contribution to a charitable fund, and had accidentally drawn the check on a bank from which he was withdrawing his account. The check therefore was returned to the depositor marked "no funds." Instead of investigating courteously, and waiting for a reply, the charitable organization sent him three letters in succession, before an answer could be received from the first, full of invective, cheap sarcasm, and accusations of dishonesty. He

said to me: "If I had received a polite statement of what had occurred, or only a recital of the exact facts, I should have explained, apologized, and sent a larger check to make up for the trouble I had inadvertently caused. As it was, I wrote them the circumstances, but added that I withdrew my subscription and that I should never give one cent to this outfit again."

After courtesy and common sense, clarity is the greatest virtue a business letter can have. Except for the personal element, it would come first of all. The other day I had a letter from a magazine in which I had done some advertising. They wanted me to continue and enlarge it, and as it had given me good results I was quite willing. But after reading the letter carefully, twice over, I was unable to get any clear idea of what it would cost me to insert a longer notice. The various rates quoted were so confused that I could not apply them to my own problem at all. I was obliged to write again, stating exactly what I wanted, and asking for a direct estimate of just what that, and not twenty other things, would cost me. The magazine being at the other end of the continent, it will be at least two weeks before I have a reply. Not only am I thus in-

convenienced, and hence to that extent antagonized, but also the magazine itself is losing two weeks of the difference in rate between my old notice and the one I am contemplating. If all their letters to advertisers are equally obscure, they must lose a great deal of money annually—perhaps enough to make the difference, to a periodical of this nature, between survival and extinction.

There is a very remarkable man in the advertising business in this country of whom you may have heard. His name is Louis V. Eytinge. His story is too long to tell here, but the essential part of it is that he spent many years of his life serving a life sentence for a murder which he did not commit. At the beginning of his term he was very ill with tuberculosis, and to earn the necessities of diet for a man in his condition, he started selling by mail the curios made by other prisoners. Suddenly the correspondence allowed convicts was cut down to one letter a month. Into this one letter, Eytinge had to put all the sales power which formerly had gone into a hundred. When the rule was revoked, he had learned (in his own phrase) to "get into the envelope and seal the flap." A few years ago he was pardoned by Governor Hunt of Arizona. He is now one



of the greatest authorities on the writing of business letters, especially of sales letters, in the United States. He has written a number of little books on the subject, from one of which, "Writing Business Letters Which Get the Business," I am taking the liberty of quoting a few salient paragraphs. They will do more good to the prospective business letter writer than hundreds of standardized form examples which he will copy slavishly, and from which he can learn nothing of the inner principles which make business letters good or bad.

One of my fellow-inmates wanted to take a course in law from some correspondence school. I wrote his inquiries and every one of these indicated that the man was a 'warm' prospect. Eight replies and eight catalogues were placed before the man for his choice. The one that won appealed to his heart, and not his head. It was a personal human letter that told the convict, with frankness, that his felony conviction would prevent admission to the bar, unless he earned a full pardon, but—while saying that for this reason the school would not sell him a law course, suggested that he make use of his evident energy by studying some other line. How many friends do you think that human honesty won for that school?

The other day I was in the market for desks and wrote a number of makers for catalogues and information. One desk I had almost determined to buy—I was ninety per cent sold. Here is the first

part of what the manufacturer wrote me: "In reply to your recent inquiry, we are sending under separate cover our catalogue, which will show you what a marvel of mechanical ingenuity and cabinet work the BLANK desk is. We have been furniture makers for blank years and we——" We this and we that!

Did I care what kind of mechanical marvel the blamed desk was? Did it matter to me how long they had been in the business? What I wanted was SERVICE, a desk that would help me in my work, and I wanted to know *how* it could do this, how handy it may have been for this or that, the time or labor it would save. I asked for cake and was given a crust.

Five years ago a certain vendor of couches for physicians' offices opened his letters like this:

"DOCTOR, YOUR OFFICE IS A DISGRACE!

"It doesn't represent your ability as a medico. Get a BLANK couch and make it decent."

Today the same writer starts out his letters on the same subject with a gentle, thoughtful, earnest approach, thus:

"You know, doctor, how helpful a proper mental attitude on the part of your patient is toward your own helpfulness, and you surely realize that a tufted, soothing BLANK couch would rest your patient until you were ready in the consultation room."

Notice the clever appeal to his intelligence with the "You know"; then the introduction of the element of comfort for the patient, making it better for the physician. There is an opening that shows

brain work and heart interest, and in all earnestness I urge that BOTH are essential.

A dealer in office filing systems said in the final paragraph of his third letter:

"There can be but one reason you have not accepted our special offer, and that the inconvenience of making a remittance at this time. . . ."

Fine indeed, isn't it? But one reason, eh, and that—because you are broke? Honestly, do you like to have that kind of thing said? This form of insult is more or less common—is one of the frequent causes for the black eyes form letters are getting. The thing to do, when you get such a letter, is to write such a reply as your feelings indicate—if the postal laws will stand for it!

And the conclusion of the little book is:

If you want your letters to pay better, put into them the qualities and associates you demand for your daily life—especially the good associations.

By "associations" the writer means the physical aspects of the letter, of which I have spoken previously. He speaks of one letter copied on a duplicating machine so that there were but three-eighth inch margins on either side. On one of these letters the president of the company addressed had written:

Buy no more goods of these people. They insult our self-esteem. Some folk have so little regard for their brain-children that they won't give them decent dress, and then expect them to please strangers.

Of course Mr. Eytinge's little book is written of sales-letters (particularly form letters) exclusively; but in one sense—and it's worth centering and putting in capitals—

#### EVERY BUSINESS LETTER IS A SALES LETTER

It doesn't matter whether you are selling a material commodity or your own services, every person who writes a business letter is trying to make money somehow—in other words, to get the money he needs or wants from some other person who has it and may be persuaded, by the letter, to give it up in return for the thing offered. If you will keep this clearly in mind whenever you start to write or dictate a letter on business matters of any kind, you will stand a much better chance of succeeding in your object. Even the most unimportant note, if it does nothing more, can create or destroy general good will toward you and what you have to sell.

So careful is one big business man of this that he told me: "I instruct my stenographers to begin and end every letter that is an answer to another in the same way the answered letter began and ended. If my correspondent writes, 'Dear Sir,' and 'Yours truly,' so do I; if he is a more expansive soul, and addresses

me as "Dear Mr. Blank" and concludes "Very sincerely yours," I do likewise. In this way, I am never blamed for undue familiarity or freezing dignity."

As I said before, standardized forms are of little value to the student of business letter writing or anything else. But if he will remember that they are not meant to be copied or paraphrased, like the ridiculous "manuals of love letters" which servant-girls used to buy and imitate in our grandmothers' day, a series of examples may provide more useful hints than pages of moralizing and advice.

I happen to have access to the files of a very successful corporation which carries on a large correspondence. It is also exceptional in that its office manager is a woman of education and of real intelligence. Let us consider these files at our disposal, and filch from the various letters, to and from the company, which may serve as models and exemplars. Never forget, however, that a letter is only a conversation on paper; and that if you would not repeat Mr. Brown's exact words to Mr. Robinson when you are talking to Mr. Black, there is no more reason why you should consider Mr. Brown's letter to Mr. Robinson worth copying when you are *writing* to Mr. Black.

## EXAMPLE 1.

*(Application for Position)*

I wish to apply for the position as stenographer outlined in your advertisement in today's.....  
I am a graduate of the.....High School and the  
.....Business College, and have taken courses  
in English composition at.....College.

I had five years' experience in the office of the  
.....Manufacturing Co., and on Mr.....'s  
death, in 1924, I became secretary to Mr.....,  
president of the.....Co., where I am now em-  
ployed. I should like, however, to secure a position  
nearer my home.

My present salary is \$.....a month. I am  
accustomed to handle general correspondence and  
can take any dictation at ordinary speed.

My office telephone number is....., my home  
telephone..... Mr.....knows of my appli-  
cation to you, and I can arrange to call for a per-  
sonal interview at any time.

## EXAMPLE 2.

*(In Response to an Inquiry)*

We are glad to have your letter of October 10th,  
for we feel that the [name of product] meets your  
requirements exactly. Its weight is only sixteen  
pounds, and yet it is so strong in construction that  
it will stand very hard use. The fittings you men-  
tion we can supply and adjust without extra cost  
to you, and without delay. The cost complete will  
be \$.....

If you will let us know what day and hour would



be convenient to you, we shall be glad to have our man call and demonstrate this machine to you, without your incurring any responsibility. If you feel it is suitable to your needs, we shall be glad to have you try it out in your office for a week without charge, at the end of which time you are free either to return it collect to us or to keep it permanently.

We enclose a card addressed to ourselves. If you will check the offer which you prefer we will do the rest.

#### EXAMPLE 3.

*(An Overdue Bill)*

In the thought that you may have overlooked our usual March statement, we are reminding you that we have not yet received your check in payment for the articles furnished you in February. We should appreciate hearing from you, as our first desire is to give you satisfaction. We feel that our customers are our friends, and hope that you will regard this note as a reminder, not as a dun.

We are aware that this is the slow season in our common line of business, and if you wish us to hold this account over until April or May, we shall be very willing to do so on receipt of an explanatory word from you.

#### EXAMPLE 4.

*(Refusing an Order)*

I am sorry to say that since last October we have discontinued carrying the....., and so are unable to fill your order of July 23rd. This line is not now being sold by any wholesaler in this city, but we

think you would be interested in the....., which we are carrying in its place.

I enclose a descriptive catalogue, and if you are interested should be glad to send our representative to explain the.....in detail. The cost, you will note, is lower than was that of the....., and yet it is as good a machine in every way.

I very much regret this unavoidable delay to you, and trust you will decide to try the.....instead, as we can promise immediate delivery.

#### EXAMPLE 5.

##### *(Receipt of a Check)*

Thank you very much for your letter of January 8th, enclosing check for \$150 in payment for the .....sent you on January 2nd. We appreciate highly your promptness in closing this account, and hope you will keep us in mind when you are next in need of any of the articles in which we deal.

Please remember that we stand ready at any time to make any necessary repairs or adjustments free of charge, and that we carry a complete line of equipment and supplies. I enclose our new catalogue; a telephone call will bring anything you need to you by the next mail.

#### EXAMPLE 6.

##### *(A Letter of Recommendation)*

The bearer of this letter, Mr....., has come to us very highly recommended by our home office. He will show you his credentials and letters. He is also a personal friend of....., with whom I believe you are well acquainted.

We should like to keep him ourselves, but we have no prospect of an opening in his line, and I recall your saying the other day that you would soon be needing a man to act in his capacity. I am therefore sending him to you, in the hope that I may be doing you both a favor.

Any courtesy or attention you may show him will be considered a personal kindness to me.

EXAMPLE 7.

*(A Refusal of Credit)*

I am sorry to have to reply to your courteous letter of November 14th by a refusal, but on orders from our home office we are having to refuse any credit to purchasers of the..... These machines are produced at so little profit to us, that what we make on them would be swallowed up in the added expense of bookkeeping in credit accounts.

Although we can sell the.....on cash terms only, we should be glad to allow you sixty to ninety days on anything else you may order from us in other lines. I trust you will understand the necessity under which I write, and will feel quite sure that this is only a general ruling, and has no personal implications whatsoever.

EXAMPLE 8.

*(Order)*

I am told that you are the official distributors of the.....machine in this city. I am in immediate need of two of these, Type 23-X, which I should like to have delivered to my office by three o'clock tomorrow afternoon.

I enclose my check for \$..... in payment. If I have made a mistake in the amount, please let me know, and I shall rectify it at once.

EXAMPLE 9.

*(Explanation of Delay)*

We had hoped to be able to send the.....machine you ordered to your address this morning, but we have just received a wire from our warehouse in .....stating that the wreck yesterday on the .....Railroad included a carload lot of the machines consigned to them. These were completely destroyed, and they will therefore be unable to fill the order until a new carload is received from the factory. This has been ordered by telephone and will probably arrive next Wednesday.

We are anxious not to inconvenience you, and are therefore sending you tomorrow morning a machine now in use in our own office, but which we can spare for a few days. We hope you can use this without trouble until the new machine reaches you, when we shall have our man call for the one we are lending you. This machine of ours is of the 7-B Type instead of the 20-C which you ordered, but we believe you will find no difficulty in making temporary use of it. When it is delivered, our man will set it up and explain the difference in equipment between the two types.

EXAMPLE 10.

*(Inquiry)*

I am interested in securing a.....machine for my office, and should be obliged if you would send me your latest catalogue and price list. Do you sell

these machines on the installment plan, and if so, on what terms? What would the additional cost of the standard equipment be?

If you would send your representative to see me any afternoon this week, between two and four, I should like to talk the matter over with him, and if I decide to purchase your make I shall send order and remittance before the end of the week. Please address your reply to me personally.

I may add that I have been using the.....machine, but have not found it altogether satisfactory, as it is in frequent need of repairs. Durability and simplicity of construction are of great importance in the kind of work we are doing, and I am told that the.....possesses these. I should be grateful if in your reply you would give me detailed information as to these points.

The average business man, when he opens his morning mail, takes up the contents in the following order: checks, orders, correspondence referring to prospective orders; current business; minor business queries; advertising—which includes form letters. Many executives nowadays never open their own mail at all; their secretaries do that for them, and the employers are apt to give orders that advertising and form letters, with few exceptions, are to go in the waste basket. You have to be one of the exceptions; your letter has to present an appearance and possess a wording that will make

the most "hard boiled" secretary feel that perhaps the boss had better see that one.

Other things being equal, the shorter your letter, the better the reception it will have. But it must not be so short that it does not cover fully the entire subject you have in mind. It must be forceful without eccentricity; human without familiarity; dignified without stiffness; clear without repetition.

You may say, and very justly, "But lots of firms write atrocious business letters, which violate every one of these rules; and yet they prosper, and no one ever complains." That is very true, up to a certain point. No one, however, knows how much business they *lose* by bad letters, how much more prosperous they would be if their letters were good. And when some other firm with equally high-class commodities, and a noticeably better sort of correspondence, competes with them for the same customer, it is the latter which nearly always wins the business.

Modern business is very much like feeding the bears in the zoo; the bears will grasp at any delicacy held out to them; but if one man is holding out a doubtful looking apple and another a piece of bread spread with delicious



honey, it is the man with the honey who will be mobbed by the bears.

All of us, however private and sheltered our lives, or however far removed from ordinary commercial pursuits, do at some time or another have to write actual or practical business letters. We may only be complaining about an overcharge by the grocer, or ordering a department store bargain by mail, or explaining why we can't pay the gas bill till the fifteenth. But these are all business letters, and every one of them will gain its object better if it possesses the threefold virtue of clarity, brevity and force. The letter a writer sends to the editor with a story is a business letter, and a good letter has sold many a story on the borderline between acceptance and rejection.

I was once in a position where I had to consider nearly a hundred letters answering an advertisement and applying for a job. I was never so forcefully struck with the incompetency and inefficiency of the general public. Out of that mass of letters it was pathetically easy to pick the half dozen, the writers of which knew what they wanted to say, and said it directly, clearly and briefly. One of these half dozen, naturally, got the job.

When you write a business letter—I might

say, when you write any letter, but most of all a business letter—before you mail it, *pretend you are the recipient* (especially if he is a stranger) and read it over in that light. It is the best training I can recommend in the production of business letters that “get the business”—whatever the special business you have in mind may be.



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